

23.02.04 Making Home Hour

SM Sarah McConnell  
LA Lauren K. Alleyne  
AA Alexia Arthurs  
MM Maggie Marangione  
SI Solomon Isekeije

SM  
Many Americans know calypso as something like this.

MUSIC  
( 'FEELING HOT HOT HOT' PLAYS)

LA  
I know everybody thinks of the party music but actually, in Trinidad calypso is a social commentary.

SM  
Like this song from 2011 Carnival Monarch Karene Asche.

MUSIC  
( 'Science is claiming (INAUDIBLE) getting warmer / De phenomenon known as climate change')

LA  
Folks are writing and singing about the state of the country about taxes about you know, and it's rooted in the African tradition of that time of slavery even of speaking back to power.

MUSIC  
(KARENE ASCHE SONG PLAYS)

SM  
Lauren K. Alleyne says it's these calypso roots that tie her poetry so closely to what's going on the world around her.

LA  
For me, what it means to sit down and to put pen to paper, began for me as a way to have a conversation with something larger, with something that was important, not just to me, but for those around me and the society I was in.

SM  
From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good rRason. I'm Sarah McConnell. Today on the show, making art of the places we're from the places we live, and the places we've left behind. Lauren K. Alleyne lived the first part of her life in Trinidad and Tobago, and then moved to America at 18 and has been there since. Her poems explore

what it's like to have one foot in Trinidad and one in America. Home, she says, is her poetry. Lauren K. Alleyne is an English professor at James Madison University, and Executive Director of the Furious Flower Poetry Center there. She has been named an outstanding faculty member by the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia.

SM

Lauren, you've said your first poetic home was in calypso music. You talk about how writing for calypso helped you understand, in poetry form, how to address political issues.

LA

I think, for me, that the idea of like the self, and the world is always together in the poems, right? Like, what am... what am I wrestling with, and how does it fit into this larger conversation? So I guess that's where I start... so that when I got to graduate school and there's discussion of like, what is political poetry, and should the poem be political? It seemed like such a foreign, literally foreign argument to me, because, of course, of course it is. My first writing was about the political. And it felt to me like a departure, not to be political. And so bringing that back and sort of harnessing that calypso sensibility in the writing allowed me to open back those doors and to really engage in that way.

SM

You came to America at age 18 after having spent your entire life in Trinidad. For people less familiar with it, describe just a little bit Trinidad.

LA

Oh my goodness, describe Trinidad. Trinidad is the southernmost island in the Caribbean. And it's actually Trinidad and Tobago, the Brits hitched us back in the 1800s. So we're a two island nation, and of just over a million people. I grew up in central Trinidad, which is the plains, it's flat. It was sugar cane country. So I grew up in a village surrounded by sugar cane. We were very mobile as a family, right? And my mother always loved the ocean. And so our pilgrimages to the various shores, the various coasts, were frequent and wonderful,

SM

That love of water, and that familiarity with water, is central to your very political poem, Variations in Blue. This poem was prompted by a conversation about swimming that you had with the poet Frank X Walker. What have you said that surprised you?

LA

Well, yes, I was talking with Frank who is wonderful poet, poet laureate of Kentucky, and a friend. And he just mentioned "I don't know how to swim" and I, I sort of clutched my pearls and gasped right, like "what?" And then he said, very somberly, "There are no

pools for Black folk when I was coming up." And coming from an island where everyone is of color, Black and other, and an island, right, surrounded by water, we learned to swim early, we... that was a part of us. It felt unimaginable to me.

SM

Would you read Variations in Blue for me?

LA

Absolutely. Variations in Blue for Frank X Walker. "In sleep's 3-D theatre: home, a green island surrounded by the blue of ocean. Zoom to the heart, see the Couva swimming pool filled with us -black children shrieking our joy in a haze of sun; our life-guard, Rodney, his skin flawless and gleaming-black as fresh oil -his strut along the pool's edge, his swoonworthy smile; Daddy a beach-ball-bellied Poseidon, droplets diamonding his afro; my brother, hollering as he jumps into his bright blue fear, his return to air gasping and triumphant. And there, the girl I was: dumpling thick and sun-brown, stripped down to the red two-piece suit my mother had made by hand, afloat in the blue bed of water, the blue sky beaming above. When I wake up, I'm in America where Dorothy Dandridge once emptied a pool with her pinkie, and in Texas a black girl's body draped in its hopeful, tasseled bikini, struck earth instead of water, a policeman's blue-clad knees pinning her back, her indigo wail a siren. I want this to be a dream, but I am awake and in this place where the only blue named home is a song and we are meant to sink, to sputter, to drown."

SM

When I first read this, it's a magnificent poem. And I loved the imagery of your family members in the pool. And I of course, recall the hideous video that you described toward the end of the young girl who was simply trying to swim in a local pool when she was tackled to the ground very horrifically by a police officer.

LA

Yes, absolutely. And it's so interesting what summons a poem. Because I had seen that video, I had written that... I had so many false starts of like, what, how to enter what had clearly moved something in me in language. And then this conversation with Frank happens, and they collapse together, right? The bikini, and the bikini, and the anticipation that I knew I felt every time we knew we're going to the beach, we're going to the pool, and how that has such a different landing, literally of like jumping in the pool versus being slammed to the ground, right? And so that's the alchemy of the poem, right?

SM

Do you ever feel that you need to be summonsing your Blackness in America versus your Blackness growing up in Trinidad?

LA

Absolutely. And I think that it's absolutely a different... I don't even want to say upbringing, but psychic world that is created when you grew up in a place where everyone you know is Black, or of color, as we say here, because there are East Indians in Trinidad. There's, you know, we're very racially diverse, but white folks are like 2%, right? So your garbage man, your teacher, your president, your prime minister, your ministers, everybody looks like you in some form or another. And I think that that fosters a different space internally. And I do think that coming to America, with its legacy and the difficulty of its history, which we share. Slavery happened in the Caribbean.

But the African American experience is distinct from the Caribbean experience, the Trinidadian experience. And I look Black, I look African American. And, and I'm treated as such, in many ways and instances that I, for a long time did not understand. Which both worked and didn't work, right? I think sometimes back of instances when I was in college was like, "Oh, I think that person was being racist, but I just thought they were dumb." I didn't understand. But also sometimes I didn't understand I was supposed to know my place. And sometimes that's dangerous, like I am with friends who are like, "You can't go to this part of the country, don't wander into these spaces as a Black person," which I have no sense of, right? It is a different sensibility.

And I think that one of the gifts, or insights of being an immigrant who is Black, from that upbringing, that 18 years of being a Black girl in a Black space, going to all girls schools, where all of all of us were Black girls, and expected to do amazing things because I had the privilege to go to really great schools. And then coming to America, where the expectations and what it means to be a Black person, a Black woman, a Black girl, is so reduced and limited. And to, to have both of those experiences is, is an interesting and unique perspective. And it's one that I think is always in the poems for me.

SM

I love your poem For My Brother(s), about seeing your own brother as he grew up freely in Trinidad. When did you begin working on For My Brother, For My Brothe(s)?

LA

For My Brother(s) is one of, is the first things I started to write after Trayvon Martin's murder, which I think was very impactful for me as it was, I think, the first sort of social civic movement of Black folks that happened while I was in the States and simultaneously conscious of America's history, which was not something I arrived to America with, right? I got the milk and honey, Golden Fates sort of version. And, and I for a long time couldn't figure out what, what that pain was that felt so deep and visceral. And there was, I forget which one of the photos where, just you know, he doesn't look at all

like my brother, but in a sleight of eye, and memory, and wistfulness, and 3am-ness, I was just like, "Oh my god, that could be Ray." And then the whole circumstance of it, of walking somewhere, of being sassy. But it took a long time for it to sort of come together. So I didn't finish it until 2021. But that's sometimes, poems are like that. Sometimes you have to grow to meet the poem.

SM

Please read it for me.

LA

Absolutely. The title is For My Brother(s), and the 'S' on the end is parenthesized, For My Brother, For My Brothers. And this is for Trayvon Martin. "My brother was a dark-skinned boy with a sweet tooth, a smart mouth, and a wicked thirst. At seventeen, when I left him for America, his voice was statted with approaching adulthood, he ate everything in the house, grew what felt like an inch a day, and wore his favorite shirt until mom disappeared it. Tonight I'm grateful he slaked his thirst in another country, far from this place where a black boy's being calls like crosshairs to conscienceless men with guns and conviction. I remember my brother's ashy knees and legs, how many errands he ran on them up and down roads belonging to no one and every one. And I'm grateful he was a boy in a country of black boys, in the time of walks to the store on Aunt Marge's corner to buy contraband sweets and sweetdrinks with change snuck from mom's handbag or dad's wallet— how that was a black boy's biggest transgression, and so far from fatal it feels an un-American dream."

SM

I have chills. And it's such a powerful poem, especially because you relate it so strongly to your own brother. There's another way that you look at having half your life in Trinidad and half your life in America, through another poem that's called Nothing to Declare, about traveling home and then traveling back again, which is also home.

LA

Home is such a fraught concept, right? Like what do we make home? Who do we call home? What landscapes are home to us? Home is a feeling, home is a fact, right? Where you were born, where you grew up. It's just endlessly fascinating to me. And, again, in terms of leaving home at 18, literally turned 18 in June and left home in July, right? And so I was a child in Trinidad, and there is all the nostalgia, and imperfect recollection, and lack of understanding and context of childhood that happened in that place. So I annoy everybody because I say "I'm going home" when I'm in Trinidad. And when I'm in Trinidad I'm like, "I'm going home" and they're like, "Well, pick," and I'm like, "That's not how that works."

SM

Would you read the poem Nothing To Declare?

LA

Nothing to Declare. "There is no name for what rises in you as you enter the dim world of the taxi and wheel through the night, escorted by smooth jazz and a battalion of street-lights. At the airport, you heave the bags you have stuffed to the limits of carriage and check them in. You have no trouble knowing what to do with your empty hands. At security, the usual stripping. You surrender your body to the scan, the searching sweep, as if what is dangerous is not what cannot be so easily detected. You comply. At the gate, grateful to be early, you sit with your books, plug in devices that tether you to this place you're meant to be leaving, that crowd out thoughts of arrival and its bittersweet complications. Yuh going home or just visiting, someone will ask, and you never know how you will answer. You know the bones of your mother's brown arms will wind around you, her breath against your neck will baptize you again in names you have no one to call you in the other place you belong to. You know the waiting untended in you will surge toward her, and you know something else will sink, sulk itself into a familiar, necessary sleep. You know yourself now only as the ocean knows this island—always pulling away, always, always, returning."

SM

Oh, I so love that line. "Your mother's breath will baptize you with the names that you have no one to call you in this other land." You are of course a celebrated poet, but also the director of the Furious Flower Poetry Center at James Madison University. When will be your next gala gathering of the greatest Black poets in America?

LA

I am so fortunate to have become the Executive Director in June of 2022. Taking over from our founder, Dr. Joanne Gabbin, the visionary who created Furious Flower, first as an idea celebration of Gwendolyn Brooks, and that evolved in 2005 a brick-and-mortar center that is the nation's first academic center dedicated to Black poetry. And what that means is our tagline you know, "celebrate, educate, preserve." That is my mammoth task as I prepare for the 2024 Furious Flower conference in September 2024.

SM

No one better to do it. Lauren Alleyne, this has been such an honor for me. Thank you for talking with me on With Good Reason.

LA

Thank you so much for having me, Sarah. Appreciate it.

SM

Lauren K. Alleyne is an English professor and Executive Director of the Furious Flower Poetry Center at James Madison University. She has been named an outstanding faculty member by the State Council of

Higher Education for Virginia. Her most recent poetry collections are Difficult Fruit, and Honey Fish.

SM

Alexis Arthurs grew up in a New York City neighborhood that was filled with other Caribbean immigrants and diaspora. As an adult, she moved to the Midwest and was looking for a way to feel closer to her cultural home. That's when her award winning short story collection, How to Love a Jamaican, was born. Arthurs is an English professor at George Mason University.

SM

Alexia, you moved at age 12 from Jamaica to New York City, and remember feeling excited about it, but have later been able to see really how traumatic immigration is for all of us. You call it living in the diaspora. What is diaspora living to you?

AA

You know, I think I, so I grew up in the diaspora, meaning that I grew up in, in parts of Brooklyn, you know that the people who lived there were from the Caribbean. And those were my friends in school. Those are the people who I knew at church. And I took that for granted. It wasn't until I moved to the Midwest for graduate school, I moved to Iowa. It wasn't until I moved there that I realized the beauty of my experience in New York, the fact that a lot of my cultural touch points I was able to carry with me from the Caribbean to New York because I lived in the diaspora. And I haven't lived in New York since, you know, it's been over a decade, and it's an experience that I still miss.

SM

Tell me about that neighborhood in New York where so many relatives from Jamaica, and friends, and schoolmates all were there. What did you have as far as the Jamaican diaspora there?

AA

We had the culture, we had Jamaican restaurants, we had markets that sold the kinds of foods that we eat on a daily basis. Like our variety of spinach is called callaloo. And I haven't been able to find fresh callaloo outside of New York. Certain fruits or vegetables, I just haven't been able to find them outside of New York.

SM

You know, the first time you left New York was for Iowa. I'm sure the culture shock and the differences were greatest then.

AA

Oh, yeah, definitely. It was, you know, it was a bit of a cultural shock. So when I lived in New York, I didn't introduce myself to people as being Caribbean. But when I moved to the Midwest, when

people asked where I was from, I said I was from the Caribbean. It was strange, because in New York there's so many of us, but going to Iowa, there's so few of us that it felt like my identity. I think I held, I held my identity closer to me. And I found myself cooking more Jamaican foods. Do you know, it was in Iowa that I also wrote my book, a book of short stories about Jamaicans. And I think a part of that, a part of my need to be closer to my, to my cultural roots was because I was farther away.

SM

You said you started your award winning book of short stories there. It's called How to Love a Jamaican. Where does the title come from?

AA

You know, people always ask me that. That title is from one of the... it's actually from a line of dialogue in the title story, in which a man is explaining to another man how to love a Jamaican man. He was essentially saying, you know, "We need good food, we need good comfort from our wives." It's very gendered and misogynistic. I think that, that Jamaican culture has a lot to contend with in terms of its hyper masculine cultural aspects. And that line of dialogue was interested in that. So I pulled it out of that line of dialogue. And it's, it spoke to the entire collection, because the collection is so interested in relations between Jamaicans, whether it's familial, or romantic, you know, or, or friendship. The collection to me is so interested in what it means to be close to someone.

SM

As you wrote these short stories over the years, far apart from your Caribbean neighborhood in New York City, or from the Jamaica where you were born, did you find your perspective was shifting on how you wrote about your Caribbean identity, or memories, or experiences?

AA

I do think that, that distance fed my imagination in really rich ways. If, I think if I had lived in New York, or if I had been closer to New York in terms of distance, I don't, I don't know that I would have been able to really reflect as deeply as I, as I did. I think it's hard for me and for a lot of writers to write about something if we're too, if we're too close to it. It did help me to, to write more honestly about my and my family's experiences.

SM

Do you have the book with you? Would you be willing to read from one of your stories in the collection?

AA

Sure. So I'm going to read from a story called On Shelf. So when I was writing the collection, most of it is set in New York or, or in Jamaica, but I do have a couple of stories that are set in the

Midwest. And that happened because I was so inspired and so influenced by the question of what it means to be a Jamaican who lives outside of the diaspora, who lives in the Midwest. So the story I'm going to read from is about a character who lives in the Midwest. And she, she's over 40, and she really wants to get married and have children. And she, she reconnects with a Jamaican man who she knew in Jamaica who also lives in the U.S. And he is kind of awful. But she makes it work.

And their shared cultural roots is important to her. "He would wrap one arm around her, and they would talk about life back home. About people they both knew, about the state of the country, about their mothers who are still making life in Jamaica. They would laugh at so-and-so foolish person, at their younger selves, at the ignorance, and arrogance, and the hilarity of Jamaicans. Sometimes it seemed that he'd saved her from the loneliness of the Midwest. She never felt more connected to him than when they were talking about Jamaica. 'Whatever happened to so-and-so her person?' she might ask. And he would explain that the person was now married and living in Canada, or moved to another parish, or the same as they remembered him. "Life in Jamaica sweet," Glenroy would say, would always say. And Dorinne would agree because it was true. They were of the same generation, the ones who had left the Caribbean as adults for better lives. And they would spend the rest of their years making comparisons, making complaints. But when they thought about it, when they really considered it, every road lead to America. They would build retirement homes in Jamaica." So that's from the story called On Shelf.

SM

You really capture her predicament, and her need for that shared identity, though, as you said, he's really awful, but she makes it work. What else do you have coming up?

AA

I am working now on a novel that is in some ways a continuation of my short story collection. It is interested in Jamaicanness. So I think of Jamaica as a country that has a lot of global influence. When you think of Bob Marley, when you think of sports. You know, in a western gaze, Jamaica has a lot of global influence. So the novel is interested in that. It's interested in unpacking some of the stereotypes that people believe to be true about Jamaican culture. I wish I could say more about the novel. But, you know, that's, that's all I can share right now.

SM

Well, Alexia Arthurs, thank you for sharing your insights with me on With Good Reason.

AA

Thank you for having me.

SM

Alexis Arthurs is an English professor at George Mason University, and the author of *How to Love a Jamaican*. This is *With Good Reason*. We'll be right back.

SM

Welcome back to *With Good Reason* from Virginia Humanities. The themes of coming of age stories are universal: independence, disillusionment, purpose, power. But it's the particulars that make a story stick with us, whether it's Dicken's England or Baldwin's Harlem. Maggie Marangione's novel *Across the Blue Ridge Mountains*, roots coming of age in her adopted home, the Appalachian communities of Shenandoah. Marangione is an English professor at Blue Ridge Community College.

SM

Maggie, your new novel, *Across the Blue Ridge Mountains*, begins in 1918 when the main character, Mary, is 15 years old. Tell me about Mary and her journey.

MM

Yep, Mary is born into a small town of Elkton, Virginia. And, you know, she's born into a time period that is seeing so much tumultuous change. The issues with World War One, women's rights, rapid industrialization. And so that is kind of the backdrop to Mary's own very personal story as she tries to find footing for herself and her life.

SM

How would you say Mary's story, as both an outsider and someone who is deeply rooted in the Shenandoah Valley, how would you say her story is like your own?

MM

You know, the idea of being an outsider is certainly, you know, as a transplant from New York, I'm definitely an outsider to some degree, and Mary's sense of being an outsider comes more I think, inherently from her mother's rejection. And then also because she feels so different and out of step, and does not resonate in her sense of time and place. You know, she doesn't want to be a mother, she doesn't want to marry the preacher's son, she kind of has these ideas of adventure. She likes being outdoors, and for 1918, that can be a little bit difficult when you're expected to be a wife and mother and to find joy and happiness there.

SM

So at a very young age, she runs off with a guy who turns out to be a grifter.

MM

Yeah

SM

And then ultimately becomes caught up in the story that's very real in terms of history, though this is a novel, of the families that were forcibly removed to create Shenandoah National Park.

MM

Yes, she does run off and, with this grifter, who takes her to the West Virginia coal fields. And then her father, who is an influential man, hires people to bring her back. And he places her with a mountain family so she'll be safe, you know, and protected, but will not be, how do we say, aggravating her mother maybe, due to her, that her being a scandal. And ultimately from living with this mountain family up in the Shenandoah National, what becomes the Shenandoah National Park, she witnesses firsthand the removals of over 1000 families, her own family included, because by at that point she's lived up there, you know, maybe 20, 30 years and has had children up there.

SM

Why were families removed from Shenandoah National Park?

MM

Well, the powers that be wanted to create a park on the East Coast. And it is beautiful. But the fact that there were 1000 families was, was downplayed. So they had to be removed to make way for, for the park.

SM

What was your own experience with the Blue Ridge Mountains before you wrote this novel?

MM

You know, I fell in love with the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia when I first started working in Washington, D.C. For, for respite and relaxation, I'd come into the Shenandoah National Park, and I did a lot of hiking, and I began to learn about the people who lived in the park. And I got very interested in Appalachian culture, so much so that I ended up buying a small little mountain farm in Vesuvius, Virginia. As soon as I could, I moved down there and my, I guess it would have been my mid to late 20s, and lived way up in the mountains.

SM

Was there any culture shock when you first moved down from the north?

MM

Well, yes, you know, I think... I'm kind of glad I had the impulsivity of youth because I didn't think about any of these bigger implications of what it would be like to leave family, friend, and friends at a metropolitan area, and move to a very, very, very rural environment. But you know, this was, when did I move down, I think it was 1991. And

I had a very interesting experience. The day I drove down here, I pulled off in a small town to you know, get some supplies like milk and bread and stuff before I headed up and out into my house.

And I wrote a check at this little tiny convenience store. And the man looked at my license, and he looked at me and he said, "You know, the only good Yankee is a dead Yankee." And I was like, "Oh, what have I done? And where have I moved?" You know, he was kind of an outlier. Because I was welcomed and embraced by the community and I feel very blessed by that. But I think still in the late 80s, early 90s, you know, I ran into that distrust of northerners still, you know, from time to time.

SM

Yeah. And when you think about it, you know, people who are living in sort of a different world, right?

MM

Even to a certain degree, especially at, in that time period, and I think it speaks to where I even live today. When you live in very, very rural communities, a lot of time, a lot of people don't move in or out. They can stay very static.

SM

What stayed with you when you interviewed with actual descendants of families who've been removed from the park?

MM

I think the sense of home, the connection to land and family, and how much it meant to them. And that there can be such a connection to place, you know, to live in a house for generations, and to be tied to that land is really significant. And then, of course, it's the flip side of that is still to this day, the family and historical trauma that these families and these descendants still hold about being forcibly removed. And then I think also being maligned so, so badly, you know, and by the press and stereotypes.

SM

The anger persists?

MM

Yes. You know, I know, quite a few local descendants who, you know, they can't tell me, you know, they say things like, "They can't tell me not to hunt on my, you know, great grandfather's property. That was our land." And you know, that that sense of that it was somehow stolen, I guess, to a certain degree. I think it dissipates over time. But, but I don't think there's been enough distance yet because we haven't even reached the 100 year mark.

SM

I'd love for you to read a selection from the novel.

MM

Sure, I'll... I'm gonna just read the first paragraph, which kind of, I think sets the stage for what happens. So Elkton, Virginia, the Shenandoah Valley at the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, 1918. I met Helsum at court days in Harrisonburg, Virginia, the autumn of the year that I turned 15. And in some ways he was more influential on my life than my parents, because I didn't listen to them. Instead, I chose to follow Helsum across the Alleghenies, and the pitch black of a no moon night, traveling west along Swift Run Gap. This was the same road my parents and I were now bumping along on that September day, when I was still blameless. I regarded maple, oak, beech, and dogwood, holding on to some of their green leaves. The wild, pink, Virginia roses still spilling forth along the fence lines, and the second bloom of honeysuckle dripping yellow, orange and white. Like me, they were on the edge of change.

SM

I love your writing style. It's observant and taut, and moves along deftly.

MM

Oh, thank you.

SM

When you first came from New York, then to D.C., and then took these nature trips after driving a couple hours outside of DC.. to these places, you would often see on your hikes remnants of the houses, and farms, and homesteads that once were but no longer were.

MM

Yes, sometimes you'll find old foundations, old rusted metal like bed frames and car parts. Things like apple orchards that, of course, would not be native, you know, occasionally even domestic flowers like irises, which would kind of be an indication that there was an old homestead close by.

SM

It's poignant, isn't it?

MM

Very, very much so. I was hiking probably in late fall, and I found an old unmarked cemetery. So if you hadn't been off trail, you know, it was just those, those stones that kind of stick up and I'm like, "Oh my gosh, who were these people? What were their lives? You know, who's buried here?" It's haunting to me. It's haunting.

SM

What's next for you?

MM

I'm working on a story that's kind of based in the, in the 1970s in Elkton, Virginia, that's got a little more contemporary feel to it, but I think deals with kind of some of this still displacement, fallout, and people still trying to find their footing after losing a way of life. And then I'm also working on a short story collection of contemporary fiction, Appalachian experiences, if you will.

SM

Sounds wonderful. Well, Maggie Marangione, thank you for talking with me on With Good Reason.

MM

Thank you for having me.

SM

Maggie Marangione is a Professor of American and Appalachian Literature at Blue Ridge Community College. Her novel is Across the Blue Ridge Mountains.

SM

My next guest says his art is all about mixing, just like his identity. Solomon Isekeije grew up in Lagos, Nigeria, with a mix of languages and backgrounds all around him. Now an art professor at Norfolk State University. Isekeije makes art that grapples with the different parts of who he is.

SI

Art is my voice. It is how I remember things. And it is how I record things, you know, maybe for the next generation, or whoever cares to want to even think about, or look at the things that I have recorded. So for me, my everyday lived experience, my interactions with people, I find a way to incorporate all of those into my work of art. My problem all the time is, how to record all this, you know, experiences and all these interactions that are happening around me. So I just kind of do my best to create sketches, write notes, and then turn them into artworks at some point.

SM

You call yourself a contemporary African artist in diaspora. That's such an interesting phrase, right? African artist in diaspora.

SI

Yes. You know, I was born and raised in Lagos, Nigeria. My parents were born and raised. In Edo State in Nigeria. They speak a language called Edowa language. It is a subset of the Edo language from the Benin Kingdom. So growing up in Lagos, I didn't speak that language. I spoke the Yoruba language, which everybody around me in Lagos spoke. So I did not learn my native tongue, that was not the first language

that I spoke. And when you grow up in, in a situation like that, in an environment like that, you cannot help but, you know, to imagine things in different languages.

I would often listen to people speak to me about anything, and in my mind, I would repeat what they've just said, in a different language. And traditionally, naturally, I want to illustrate that as well. So what makes me an African artist in diaspora is the fact that my Africanness, my African consciousness, always stays with me. And I'm constantly viewing and interpreting the world through this lens, because that's who I am. That's my worldview. And that's how I meet the world every day. And anybody who is recording whatever is happening right now, you know, from their perspective, or even others perspective, is a contemporary artist. So if you may, you can call me a traveling artist, because I'm an African artist, who is in a different part of the world, trying to see the world through the lenses that, that I have been handed.

SM

When did you come to America?

SI

Oh, that's, it's been a while. 1998.

SM

I wonder if coming to America changed your art. I mean, if it threw you into a period of disarray for a while,

SI

Initially, it was slightly confusing. Because, you know, I had to try to figure out how I fit into this new world, and how to interpret, and how to communicate in this new world. But something happened that really helped me, you know, along this journey, and it was taking a class with my former professor, Professor Ken Daly, who introduced me to the works of Joseph Campbell. And I got fascinated by (INAUDIBLE) of dreams, and the whole notion of mythology, the whole notion that we're all heroes in a journey, and that really helped because I started to look for similar mythologies in all cultures. And then I realized that, you know, everybody goes through a journey, right? I just have to kind of understand my journey and, and figure out a way to succeed, you know, in my quest.

So that period was a formative period for me. It was a period when I had to think about the symbolism in my work, and think about how to preserve them, but also begin to include all the symbolic references from my new community. But then I got comfortable with the idea that all narratives are connected, you know? From one artwork to another, you really are telling the same story, but different versions of the same story. And so that's what gave me peace in knowing that I can look at a subject, an issue, an experience here in America, through an

African lens and vice versa. And in essence, I think that's what being an American really is about, you know. You're able to pull from multiple sources to make your experience better. And that's been my joy in terms of being a contemporary artist.

SM

you are a mixed media artist. And you've said mixing things together helps you capture your own experience of mixing in Nigeria and other cultures. How do you see that culturally mixed experience showing up in your art?

SI

Well, um, as I said, earlier, I grew up in Lagos, and in Lagos, the language is Yoruba language. The Yorubas have a pantheon of gods. Lots and lots of deities, you know, there's a deity for virtually every human experience, you know? There's a deity for, for war, for creativity, there is fertility goddess, and you just name it. And all these deities sometimes have objects that important, you know, important ceremonial objects, objects that that are associated with them. So having this knowledge as a young artist, or as a young boy, it changed my relationship with objects, with things. I'll give you an example. The god of war is Ogun in Yoruba mythology and cosmology, the god of war is Ogun. Anything that is metal, you know, iron, is, is associated with this god.

This god is believed to have a presence, or to reside, in anything that is a piece of metal. So when, when I think about a piece of metal, or anything that is metallic, I'm not just thinking about that object from its, its kind of material standpoint. I'm looking at it from its material standpoint, I'm also thinking about it as an object that has the power to connect the world of the living and the world of the ancestors. And that's, that's, I think, my source of joy when I'm working, is that I'm looking at materials and how I can combine them from a composition perspective, but also the meaning each materia brings to the composition. So there are layers upon layers of layers, you know, of meaning in my work. And that's what I find fascinating. And that's what I also believe is the African essence in my work.

SM

Your father was a Nigerian police officer who also loved Shakespeare. That's a fun mixture of interests. Tell me about his love of Shakespeare?

SI

Yeah, well, he told the stories. And then in my mind, I started to kind of like, imagine those stories and animate those stories. I eventually used that... my father passed about a decade ago, but he's a major inspiration to me as a man, you know, as an artist. I don't think he could draw, but he would offer suggestions, and some amazing critiques. As a young artist, I tend to want to say everything I want

to say on one canvas. And I recall my father saying, "It's a beautiful painting, but you don't have to pour all your ideas into this one canvas. It's a little overwhelming, can you pace yourself, you know?" And that's something that I remember up until now, and I even share with some of my students, "Take your time. You don't have to say it all at once or today. It's still tomorrow."

SM

Well, I think we all owe a debt of gratitude to your father, his wisdom, and his love of Shakespeare.

SI

Thank you. You know, my, my practice as an artist, um, is highly informed by my understanding of African art. And that same, you know, understanding is what I bring to administering the fine arts program at Norfolk State. African art is always in motion. It's never static, you know. It is about creating, it's about engagement, and it's about interaction. And that's one of the things that I've been able to share with my colleagues and our students. In our region, the Fine Arts program at Norfolk State University is known for its community engagement and community collaborative partnerships. In our program, it's much more successful because of its ability to engage the community, to give to the community, which is also something that is very, very, very important to that Yoruba worldview. That there is a lot more joy in giving, you know, sometimes than in receiving

SM

Solomon Isekeije, thank you for sharing your insights on With Good Reason.

SI

Thank you very much, Sarah, for inviting me.

SM

Solomon Isekeije is an art professor at Norfolk State University. With Good Reason is produced by Virginia Humanities, which acknowledges the Monacan nation, the original people of the land and waters of our home in Charlottesville, Virginia. Our production team is Alison Quantz, Matt Darroch, Lauren Francis and Jamal Milner. Cassandra Deering and Aviva Casto are our interns. Special thanks to Jennie Taylor for booking assistance. For the podcast, go to with good reason radio dot org. I'm Sarah McConnell. Thanks for listening.